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PATTERNS OF USE OF THE NIPISSING DISTRICT DEVELOPMENTAL SCREEN BY PHYSICIANS IN ONTARIO

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Recent recommendations emphasize the importance of screening for developmental disabilities (DD) using simple measures such as the Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS). However, evidence indicates that many physicians do not perform routine screening, or do so without the assistance of objective measures. Several barriers to screening have been proposed, including a lack of knowledge, a perceived lack of benefit, insufficient time or reimbursement, and a lack of access to inexpensive measures.

The objectives of this study are: (1) To determine if providing the NDDS free of charge is associated with increased use of this measure; (2) To investigate regional variations in the use of the NDDS in Ontario. We examined patterns of purchasing and downloading of the NDDS by physicians (FPs) and health care professionals (HCPs) before and after the implementation of the program. To give a "best-estimate" of the number of FPs who have access to the NDDS, we adjusted for: (1) the proportion of physicians in group practice and (2) the assumption that all HCPs represented physicians. Estimates of FPs using the NDDS in a given region were expressed as a fraction of the total number of FPs in that region. Results indicated that a minority (2.2%) of the over 10,000 FPs in Ontario ever accessed the NDDS. Prior to the program, 91 FPs (0.9%) purchased the NDDS, whereas 129 FPs (1.3%) had downloaded the NDDS one year after the start of the program. Including all other HCPs (65 pre- and 219 post-program) increased the estimate to 504 (5%). Adjusting for group practice increased the estimate to 7.2% of FPs or 16.5% of all HCPs with access to the NDDS. There were no significant differences in NDDS usage by FPs or all HCPs between Central (4.2% or 9.6%, respectively), SouthWestern (3.2% or 11%), and Northern (3.0% or 10%) Ontario ($p>0.05$). Significantly fewer FPs and HCPs in Eastern Ontario (1.2% or 5.8%, respectively) accessed the NDDS than in other areas of the province ($p<0.001$). In summary, despite measures to increase usage, a minority of FPs access the NDDS in Ontario. However, provision of free, easy access to developmental screening measures is effective at removing barriers to screening, as indicated by a two to three fold increase in use of the NDDS. The proportion of physicians accessing the NDDS is similar throughout the province, except for Eastern Ontario where access of the measure occurs significantly less frequently. Further research is required to investigate other barriers, so that effective methods to increase the use of developmental screening measures in clinical practice can be implemented.